Mendelssohn:
The Hebrides and other overtures

A Midsummer Night's Dream
Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage
The Hebrides (Fingal's Cave)

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Background

Mendelssohn's concert overtures have always ranked among the most enduring staples of the nineteenth-century orchestral repertoire, a position conceded by even his staunchest critics. Richard Wagner, no slight disparager of Mendelssohn's music, viewed *The Hebrides* Overture as the 'masterpiece' of a 'landscape-painter of the first order';[1] and George Bernard Shaw, who took Mendelssohn to task for his 'kid glove gentility, his conventional sentimentality, and his despicable oratorio mongering', could only report glowingly in 1892 about the *Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture: 'The most striking example I know of a very young composer astonishing the world by a musical style at once fascinating, original, and perfectly new, is Mendelssohn's exploit at seventeen years with the *Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture. One can actually feel the novelty now, after sixty-six years.'[2]

Along with *Meeresstille und glückliche Fahrt* (*Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, Op. 27), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Op. 21) and *The Hebrides* (Op. 26) were conceived during Mendelssohn's student period of the 1820s and mark the culmination of his early efforts to make a decisively original contribution to orchestral music. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* dates from August 1826, less than a year after the completion of the extraordinary Octet (Op. 20) in October 1825, a period during Mendelssohn's sixteenth and seventeenth years that surely must count as the *annus mirabilis* in his development and maturation as a composer of the first rank. *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, created like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Berlin, was first performed at the Mendelssohn home in September 1828; *The Hebrides*, of course, originated during the composer's Scottish sojourn in August 1829.

By his twentieth year, Mendelssohn thus had either discovered the ideas or completed scores for all three overtures. His fourth published overture, *Zum Märchen von der schöne Melusine* (Op. 32), which appeared in 1836, was composed and revised in 1833–4; his fifth, the *Ouvertüre für Harmoniemusik* (Op. 24), which appeared in 1839, was a reworking of the *Notturno* for eleven wind instruments of 1824. Two other overtures, the 'Trumpet' of 1826

(revised 1833) and *Ruy Blas* of 1839, were released posthumously as Opp. 101 and 95 in 1867 and 1851.

Mendelssohn delayed considerably the process of seeing through the press *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Calm Sea*, and *The Hebrides*: not until 1835 were these three works issued in full score, and then as a kind of triptych, with a dedication to the Crown Prince of Prussia. Despite their disparate subject matter – a Shakespeare play, two Goethe poems, and impressions of Scotland – Mendelssohn clearly perceived in these works common compositional techniques and aesthetic approaches to what was still a relatively new genre – the programmatic concert overture. In an enthusiastic letter of 20 October 1835, Robert Schumann also sensed the unity of the three when he welcomed Mendelssohn ('Meritis') as the new director of the Gewandhaus in Leipzig: ' "Which of Meritis' overtures do you like the best?" asked a simpleton near me – whereupon, embracing, the keys of E minor, B minor, and D major formed a triad of the Graces, and I could think of no better answer than the best one – "Every one of them".'[3]

Mendelssohn was not the first to create independent concert overtures, but he was arguably the first major composer to probe extensively the ability of the autonomous overture to treat in purely musical terms programmatic ideas, whether of a dramatic, poetic, or pictorial nature. Of course, Beethoven had composed numerous overtures, but in some way these were associated with the stage (e.g., *Coriolanus*, *Egmont*, *Ruins of Athens*, *König Stephan*, the *Leonore* Overtures) or commissioned for a particular function (e.g., *Namensfeier*, *Die Weihe des Hauses*). Of Carl Maria von Weber's three concert overtures, at least two (*Grande ouverture à plusieurs instruments* of 1807 and *Der Beherrscher der Geister* of 1811) were reworkings of overtures to operas; the occasion for the third (the *Jubel-Ouvertüre* of 1818, which may have influenced *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; see Exx. 3–4, pp. 13–14), was a celebration of the Saxon king, Friedrich August I. Concert performances of untitled overtures or overtures borrowed from operas were commonplace in the early nineteenth century, and in the rich musical life of Berlin Mendelssohn would have heard abundant examples from Mozart, Gluck, Beethoven, Weber, Spontini, and Spohr, among many others.

Of Mendelssohn's contemporaries who produced concert overtures, Hector Berlioz, who heard Mendelssohn perform an early version of *The Hebrides* at the piano in Rome in 1831, stands out: Berlioz's *Waverley* Overture, inspired by the novels of Sir Walter Scott (albeit in a general way), was completed in 1828, the year of *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*. But Berlioz and Mendelssohn came to hold sharply different views about

the use of extra-musical ideas in orchestral music. While Berlioz continued to shape and reshape the programmatic details of the *Symphonie fantastique*, distributing the initial programme to the audience at the symphony's 1830 première, Mendelssohn remained characteristically reluctant to describe or discuss extra-musical ideas in his works.[4] Rather, as he emphasized in a celebrated letter of 15 October 1842 to Marc André Souchay, Mendelssohn preferred to view music as a language and syntax of sounds superior to that of words.[5] The concert overture was the genre in which he first formulated and tested extensively his solution to the problem of music as an autonomous versus a referential art. What he essentially accomplished was to separate further the overture from its traditional role on the stage, and to free orchestral music from the conventions of the symphony – in short, to secure for instrumental music unexplored avenues of romantic expression, at once 'fascinating, original, and perfectly new'. To place this accomplishment in context, we may briefly review Mendelssohn's early career in Berlin.

Since his first public appearance at age nine in a Berlin concert,[6] Mendelssohn had gained increasing recognition as a Mozart-like prodigy. The grandson of the distinguished Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, and son of the banker Abraham Mendelssohn, young Felix was afforded a superb education by private tutors. By the age of eleven he was reading Latin and Greek and studying mathematics and geography; lessons in drawing and painting, violin, and organ probably began as well at this time.[7] Mendelssohn's first piano teacher was his mother Lea; in 1816, during a family trip to Paris, he may have had some lessons with Marie Bigot, who had known Beethoven in Vienna; and in 1821, during a visit to Weimar to meet Goethe, Mendelssohn played for Johann Nepomuk Hummel. In Berlin, Mendelssohn's development as a pianist was entrusted to Ludwig Berger, a pupil of Muzio Clementi; in 1824, Mendelssohn received some 'finishing lessons' from Ignaz Moscheles, who promptly declared that he had encountered a master, not a pupil.[8]

Mendelssohn's rapid development as a composer was nothing short of astonishing. His earliest surviving effort was an unassuming song, written at ten, for his father's birthday on 11 December 1819. By this time, however, the boy had already begun a systematic course in figured bass, chorale, fugue, and canon with Carl Friedrich Zelter, the director of the Berlin Singakademie and confidant of Goethe. Zelter's method of instruction was largely based on Johann Philipp Kirnberger's *Die Kunst des reinen Satzes* (Berlin, 1771), a treatise intended to exemplify the teachings of J. S. Bach.[9] In Zelter's instruction are found the roots of Mendelssohn's lifelong study

of Bach's music and counterpoint, a fascination he later acknowledged to Johann Christian Lobe.[10]

By Mendelssohn's fifteenth birthday (3 February 1824), Zelter could declare the pupil had finished his apprenticeship and was now an independent member of the brotherhood of Mozart, Haydn, and Bach.[11] In the space of less than five years Mendelssohn had produced *sinfonie*, concertos, chamber, piano and organ works; songs; sacred works for chorus; and several short German stage works. The decidedly academic bent of his training was revealed in a proliferation of compositions in the severe style, most notably the series of thirteen string *sinfonie* composed between 1821 and 1823, replete with chromatic writing and fugues reminiscent of Bach, but also containing, in the finale of *Sinfonia VIII*, an impressive amalgam of fugue and sonata form modelled on the finale of Mozart's 'Jupiter' Symphony.[12] Despite this proclivity for traditional counterpoint (a reviewer in 1828 noted that 'it is as though the composer desired to announce officially just how diligently he has studied and gained complete mastery of his material through counterpoint'[13]), Mendelssohn clearly made efforts to assimilate the stylistic influence of more modern composers as well. Thus his A minor Piano Concerto (1822) is indebted to Hummel's concerto in the same key, and his two double piano concertos in E and A♭ (1823 and 1824) show signs of John Field, J. L. Dussek, and Beethoven. In particular, Beethoven loomed large as a stylistic influence: in Mendelssohn's Octet, the recall of the scherzo in the finale – a device borrowed from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony – is but one clear example.[14]

In 1825 Abraham sought the advice of Luigi Cherubini in Paris about his son's prospects as a composer. In the youth's portfolio were at least two works that showed the range of his compositional interests: a Kyrie in D minor for five-part chorus and orchestra, written in a learned contrapuntal style recalling Mozart's Requiem, and his fourth piano quartet, Op. 3 in B minor, which included among its four movements an extended Beethovenian first movement in modified sonata form and a sprightly Mendelssohnian scherzo for its third. Cherubini's verdict – 'ce garçon est riche; il fera bien' – reinforced Mendelssohn's choice of profession. On their return from Paris, the Mendelssohns stopped in Weimar where Felix presented Goethe with a copy of the piano quartet; by June they had reached Berlin, and just four months later Felix completed the work that marked a startling new order of excellence: the Octet, his first masterpiece.

In this context of his precocity and accelerating maturation, Mendelssohn's path to the programmatic concert overture, which reached

its first substantial goal in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* of August 1826, should be examined. Two works, the Octet and 'Trumpet' Overture (October 1825–March 1826), provide some crucial, though generally disregarded, evidence about his approach to programmaticism, form, and orchestration in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The critical movement from the Octet is the third, the elfin scherzo in G minor; in its transparent, delicate textures is a prototype for the string music of the fairies in the overture. According to Mendelssohn's sister Fanny, the remarkable close of the scherzo, in which a lightly punctuated unison passage appears to evaporate into thin air, was prompted by a passage from Goethe's *Faust*:

> The ethereal, fanciful, and spirit-like scherzo in this [Octet] is something quite new. He tried to set to music the stanza from the Walpurgis-night Dream in 'Faust': – 'The flight of the clouds and the veil of mist/Are lighted from above./A breeze in the leaves, a wind in the reeds,/And all has vanished.' 'And he has been really successful,' says Fanny of this Ottetto, in her biography of Felix. 'To me alone he told his idea: the whole piece is to be played staccato and pianissimo, the tremulandos [*sic*] coming in now and then, the trills passing away with the quickness of lightning; everything new and strange, and at the same time most insinuating and pleasing, one feels so near the world of spirits, carried away in the air, half inclined to snatch up a broomstick and follow the aerial procession. At the end the first violin takes a flight with a feather-like lightness, and – all has vanished.'[15]

The 'Walpurgis-night Dream' to which Fanny referred was the extraordinary dream-like sequence in the first part of Goethe's epic directly after the 'Walpurgis-night' scene. Just as Goethe's 'Traum' is labelled an intermezzo, so does Mendelssohn's scherzo, intermezzolike, serve as a capricious interruption between the more serious slow movement and the weighty, *tour de force* contrapuntal finale of the Octet. But Goethe's 'Traum' invites further consideration. First of all, sprinkled throughout the passage are references to a Kapellmeister, who beseeches the diminutive members of his orchestra, 'Snout of Fly, Mosquito Nose,/Damnable amateurs!/Frog O'Leaves and Crick't O'Grass/You are musicians, sirs!'[16] And the final lines of the dream, the quatrain that inspired the close of Mendelssohn's scherzo, are assigned by Goethe to the 'Orchester (*Pianissimo*)'. Still more significant are the full title of Goethe's scene, 'Walpurgisnachtstraum oder Oberons und Titanias goldne Hochzeit' ('Walpurgisnight's Dream, or the Golden Wedding of Oberon and Titania'), and intermittent appearances throughout the scene by Oberon, Titania, and Puck. In introducing these three figures Goethe was alluding not to Shakespeare's play, but to C. M. Wieland's verse epic poem *Oberon* (1780), the *romantisches Heldengedicht* (based

in turn on a thirteenth-century *chanson de geste*) that later served as a primary source for Carl Maria von Weber's opera *Oberon* (1826). Nevertheless, for the impressionable young Mendelssohn beginning to read the Schlegel-Tieck translations of Shakespeare, the leap from Goethe's epic to Shakespeare's play, from the fanciful 'Walpurgisnachtstraum' to an orchestral work (*pianissimo*) on the 'Sommernachtstraum', must not have been difficult. Mendelssohn would have discovered related imagery for such a composition in Goethe's verses and in the scherzo of his own Octet.

In a similar way the 'Trumpet' Overture bears critically on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Completed on 4 March 1826, only five months before its companion, the 'Trumpet' Overture served as a preliminary opportunity for Mendelssohn to explore certain issues of formal structure and orchestration. Though he left no clues about the programmatic content, if any, of the overture, the work exhibits some features in form, tonal structure, and orchestration that tie it to the three overtures considered in this volume. In particular, we may identify the motto-like use of a recurring fanfare, the application of mediant relationships, and the exploration of the colouristic potential of the orchestra.

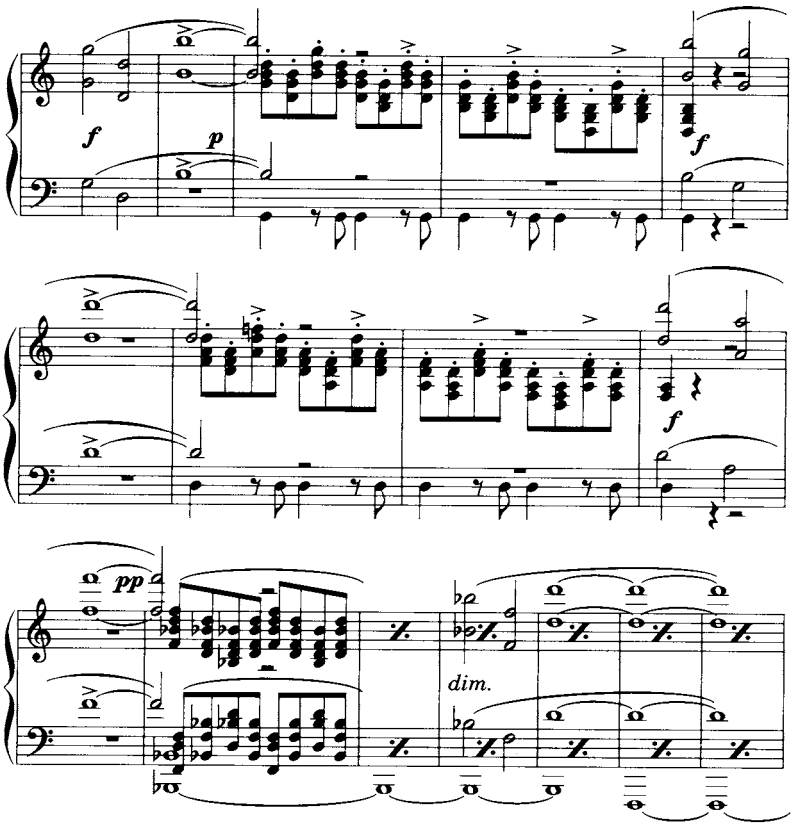
The 'Trumpet' Overture begins with a brass fanfare that returns (reharmonized) near the end of the development section, reenters (again reharmonized) at the beginning of the recapitulation, and appears (in abbreviated form) at the very end of the composition. As Eduard Devrient pointed out, Mendelssohn reused its elongated rhythmic configuration () in a more concise version in *The Hebrides* Overture, where it emerges at the end of the exposition and then figures in the development and coda ().[17] The four-fold statement of the fanfare in the 'Trumpet' Overture anticipates the three-fold, motto-like presentation of the opening wind chords in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which return to mark the recapitulation and the end of that overture. In both works a wind motive serves as a defining gesture that recurs to underscore the organic unity of the musical structure.

In the 'Trumpet' Overture the fanfare melodically defines the third C to E, and is initially accompanied by the tonic C major and the submediant A major, the third below. Near the conclusion of the development Mendelssohn touches upon E major, the mediant above the tonic; and much of the development is devoted to juxtapositions of third-related keys. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a third relation is embedded in the motto of the very opening: the ambivalent pitches of the first chord, E–G♯, may be heard as part of an E major (tonic) or C♯ minor

(submediant) harmony, and indeed C♯ minor later emerges as the goal of the development section.

This extensive use of mediant relationships acts to weaken the traditional hegemony of the tonic–dominant axis in favour of colourful relationships of more remotely related keys. Of course, Mendelssohn was not the originator of this device; the late works of Mozart and Haydn offer mediant progressions, and Beethoven developed the technique further (e.g., first movements of the Op. 31 no. 1, 'Waldstein', and 'Hammerklavier' Piano Sonatas), as did Schubert (first movement of the 'Great' Symphony in C major, D 944, which Mendelssohn would perform in Leipzig in 1839). But Mendelssohn may have been the first to ally the use of mediant relationships with a special type of orchestration, based on nuance and understatement, that he first tested in the development of the 'Trumpet' Overture and then reused in that of *The Hebrides*. In this device Mendelssohn contraposed wind figures, drawn from the related mottoes and placed in clearly articulated, shifting groups of instruments, against subdued harmonic backdrops in the strings (Ex. 1), effectively creating a kaleidoscope of changing wind colours against a soft, undulating wash of string sound. Similar scoring procedures obtain in the developments of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, though in these works the device is not necessarily restricted to individual mediant relationships. Especially masterful is the orchestration in the development of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the orchestral palette is expanded by including touches of *pianissimo* brass with individual colours of the woodwind group.

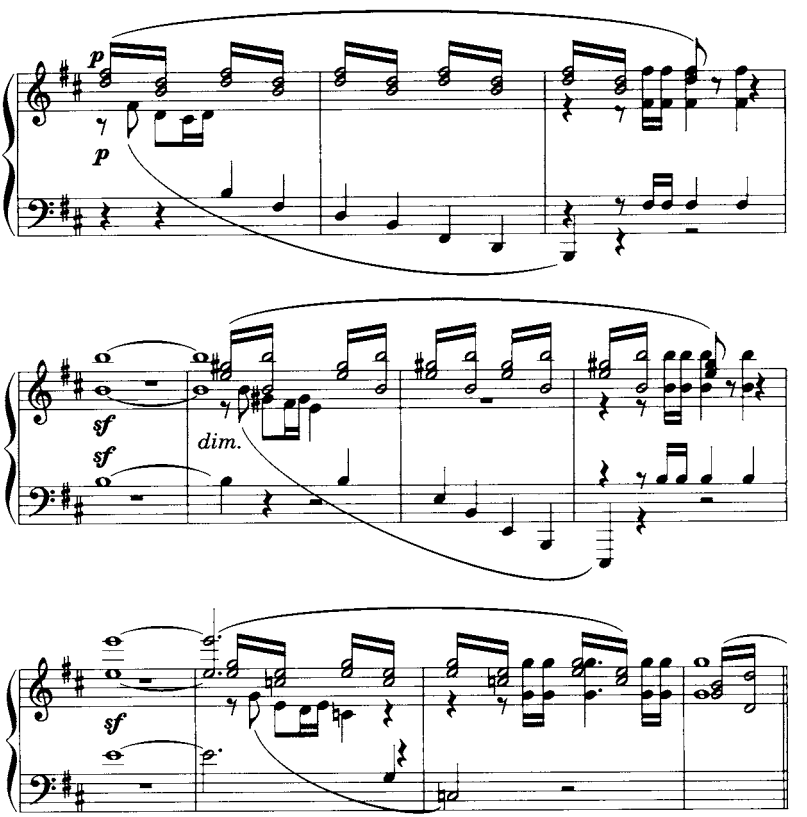
In many ways the 'Trumpet' Overture could be viewed as a preliminary study for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, though the special relationship between these works is usually overlooked in the literature, apparently because of the absence of programmatic elements in the 'Trumpet' Overture. But the scherzo of the Octet, an exemplar of that type of capricious scherzo for which Mendelssohn became so celebrated, and surely an adumbration of the special string writing in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, does suggest that his most original work from the 1820s was concerned with programmatic ideas. The extent to which the evanescent textures of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* were at the centre of his stylistic development at this critical time may be seen in the contemporaneous *Charakterstück* in E major for piano, Op. 7 no. 7, which appeared in 1827. This miniature sonata-form movement, marked *sempre staccato e pianissimo*, appears as a kind of study whose content and mood have essentially been transferred to the keyboard from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture (Ex. 2). In the first edition



Ex. 1a 'Trumpet' Overture Op. 101, beginning of development

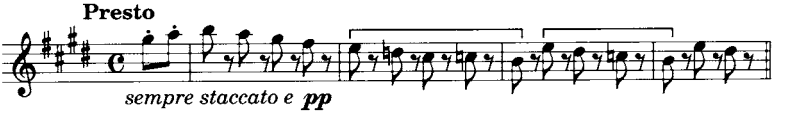
this piece appeared with the title 'Leicht und luftig' ('Light and airy'), a title that brings to mind the closing quatrain from Goethe's 'Walpurgisnachtstraum', which had inspired the scherzo of the Octet. In a similar way the words of Hermann Franck, a friend of Mendelssohn who reviewed the *Charakterstück*, return us to the sound-world of the Octet:

All flies past hastily, without rest, gathering together in colourful throngs, and then scattering in a puff. So this splendid piece impresses as a fleet-footed daughter of the air. Individual chords seem to sting before they resolve; again and again one is teased, as if in a foggy dream. All seems to resolve in a mild, limpid twilight, an indescribably lovely effect.[18]



Ex. 1b *The Hebrides* Overture, beginning of development

Franck further described the character of the music as 'strange' ('fremdartige'), recalling Fanny's description of the Octet, 'everything new and strange', which, in turn, anticipated Shaw's 1892 assessment of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as 'fascinating, original, and perfectly new'. If the Octet and *Charakterstück* remained generically separated examples in the strange



Ex. 2 *Charakterstück* Op. 7 no. 7 ('Leicht und luftig'), beginning

stylistic world Mendelssohn explored during the late 1820s, the concert overture came to inspire again and again his most experimental music, and enabled him, indeed, to discover his own identity as a composer.